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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DUBAI 001807

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/20/2016
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SUBJECT: IRAN'S FOREIGN MINISTRY UNDER AHMADINEJAD (C-NE5-01038)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jason L. Davis, Consul General, Dubai, UAE.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

1.(C) Summary: Despite a clear shift in Iran's foreign policy from a relatively more pragmatic approach to a more ideological approach, ConGen Dubai contacts with links to the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) claim that Iran's foreign policy has not fundamentally changed under newly-elected President Ahmadinejad, who was elected on a platform dominated by domestic issues. MFA employees reportedly accept the new foreign minister Mottaki but liked former minister Kharrazi better. According to one contact, relations between the MFA and the Majles are currently good, despite the president's difficulties in getting his cabinet passed. End summary.

2.(S) Conoff recently spoke with two Iranians with connections to the Iranian MFA. The first was Mohammad Reza Hakami (please protect), a technocrat and businessman who reportedly worked at one point for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). He now lives in Dubai. He has been offered a number of positions in the new government, including one as an advisor in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and another as the head of the newly established economic free trade zone in Iran's Khuzestan province, but has not committed to any yet. The second conversation was with Seyed Mohammad Ali Shahidi, a current MFA employee with 25 years of service. Conoff spoke to Shahidi during the course of his visa interview.

See No Shift in Foreign Policy

3.(S) Hakami told Conoff that to date, he has not seen a shift in Iran's foreign policy under Ahmadinejad from that under Khatami. Hakami believes that Ahmadinejad will focus on domestic issues, as that is where his supposed "expertise" lies. Shahidi likewise stated that there has been no noticeable shift in Iran's foreign policy under the new administration. (Note: Shahidi has also worked for Iran's Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. End Note.) Neither man believed that Iran's foreign policy would shift to "the east", as has been suggested, predicting instead that it will remain relatively constant. Nonetheless, both Hakami and Shahidi reiterated concerns that Conoff has heard repeatedly since Ahmadinejad's election in July 2005 about his lack of foreign policy experience and the possibility that this inexperience could precipitate a crisis.

MFA Employees Liked Kharrazi Better

5.(C) Shahidi asserted that MFA employees have accepted new

Foreign Minister Mottaki. He volunteered, however, that they "liked (former Foreign Minister Kamal) Kharrazi better," but gave no indication as to the reasons behind this preference.

MFA and Majles Getting Along

6.(C) According to Shahidi, who works in the MFA's Majles Affairs Office, current relations between the MFA and the Majles are good. Relations improved following Ahmadinejad's election, he claimed, because the Majles and the MFA are now both in the hands of Iran's conservatives and thus no longer have to contend with factional squabbles when working together. (Note: Shahidi made no mention of the problems Ahmadinejad had in getting his cabinet accepted by the Majles.)

Make-Up of Iran's MFA

7.(S) In contrast to pre-revolutionary Iran, the MFA is no longer dominated by certain families, according to Hakami. There were key families with networks in the MFA under the Shah from among the so-called "1000 families," but this no longer holds true. Those Iranians who currently serve in the MFA who are not political appointees must attend the MFA's university, which is located in north Tehran. They enter this university by scoring well on the concours (Iranian college entrance exam) in sciences ("ulum" in Persian). Once they graduate from this university, they are required to take another exam -- apparently comparable to the Foreign Service Exam -- before they can actually begin their official training as MFA employees.

8.(C) Nonetheless, it is very difficult to get a posting outside of Iran in the MFA unless you have close ties to regime stalwarts according to a Dubai-based Iranian businessman (who does not have known ties to the MFA) who is a longstanding Congen Dubai contact. This applies to lower positions, as well as higher ones. He claims that MFA and other Iranian government employees posted overseas get special benefits, including the

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equivalent of two salaries. They receive one salary in Iran that is taxed, and a second un-taxed salary in the location of their posting, which includes money for rent, furniture, and trips back to Iran. (Note: This arrangement tracks closely with what Conoff has heard regarding Iranians who work for Iranian companies outside Iran. These employees routinely make double the salary of their counterparts in Iran and are also provided with additional money for rent and trips back to Iran.)

Comment

9.(C) Despite these two men's claims to the contrary, there appears to us to have been a clear change in Iran's foreign policy since Ahmadinejad took office, with the policy becoming more ideological and less pragmatic. Soon after taking office, Ahmadinejad launched a massive purge of more pragmatic Foreign Ministry employees, including almost half of Iran's ambassadors. Certainly the Iranian president's statements have become harsher and the government's positions less conciliatory since Ahmadinejad took office (though recently the statements seemed to have been somewhat curbed). The disconnect may be the result of the Iranian government framing its actions for domestic audiences as defensive, in response to "attacks" from the outside, whereas to the rest of the world, they appear offensive. It is noteworthy that both inside and outside Iran, people fear that Ahmadinejad will miscalculate the situation.

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